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Governor's forums on education

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GOVERNOR'S FORUMS ON EDUCATION

REPORT TO MONTANANS

February 28, 1990



STAN STEPHENS
GOVERNOR

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Helena, Montana 59620
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STAN STEPHENS
GOVERNOR

February 28, 1990

Dear Fellow Montanans:

In September 1989 President Bush met with the nation's governors to develop national education goals which would stimulate state efforts to improve the education our children receive. I share the President's concerns that the performance of our country's education system is falling behind those in other industrialized nations. While supporting the national goals, I remain convinced that we in Montana must set our own goals for educational improvement unique to the needs of our schools and our state.

To begin discussion in this area, my staff and I worked with the Montana education community to develop a forum for public discussion. We scheduled a series of seven public meetings in a cross section of Montana communities and designed a format which would stimulate the sharing of individual views and comments about Montana's education system and how it can be improved.

The success of the forums is illustrated by the fact that over two thousand Montanans participated in the public discussions in Glendive, Havre, Billings, Lewistown, Missoula, Columbia Falls, and Butte. Two thirds of the participants were either school trustees or school district employees while the remainder were parents or other concerned citizens.

I entered each forum with an open mind and a commitment to get Montanans thinking about ways to improve the education of their children. I offered some general proposals for change and asked for public comment.

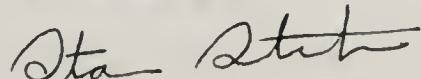
The response from Montanans was heartening. Their willingness to share their views was genuine, and their support for education strong. We learned a great deal in the forum discussions which will benefit us as we continue the process of maintaining and improving the education offered Montana's children. The report on the views of forum participants follows this letter.

This is, of course, just a beginning. More discussion is needed and will be forthcoming between this administration, the state's education community and Montana citizens.

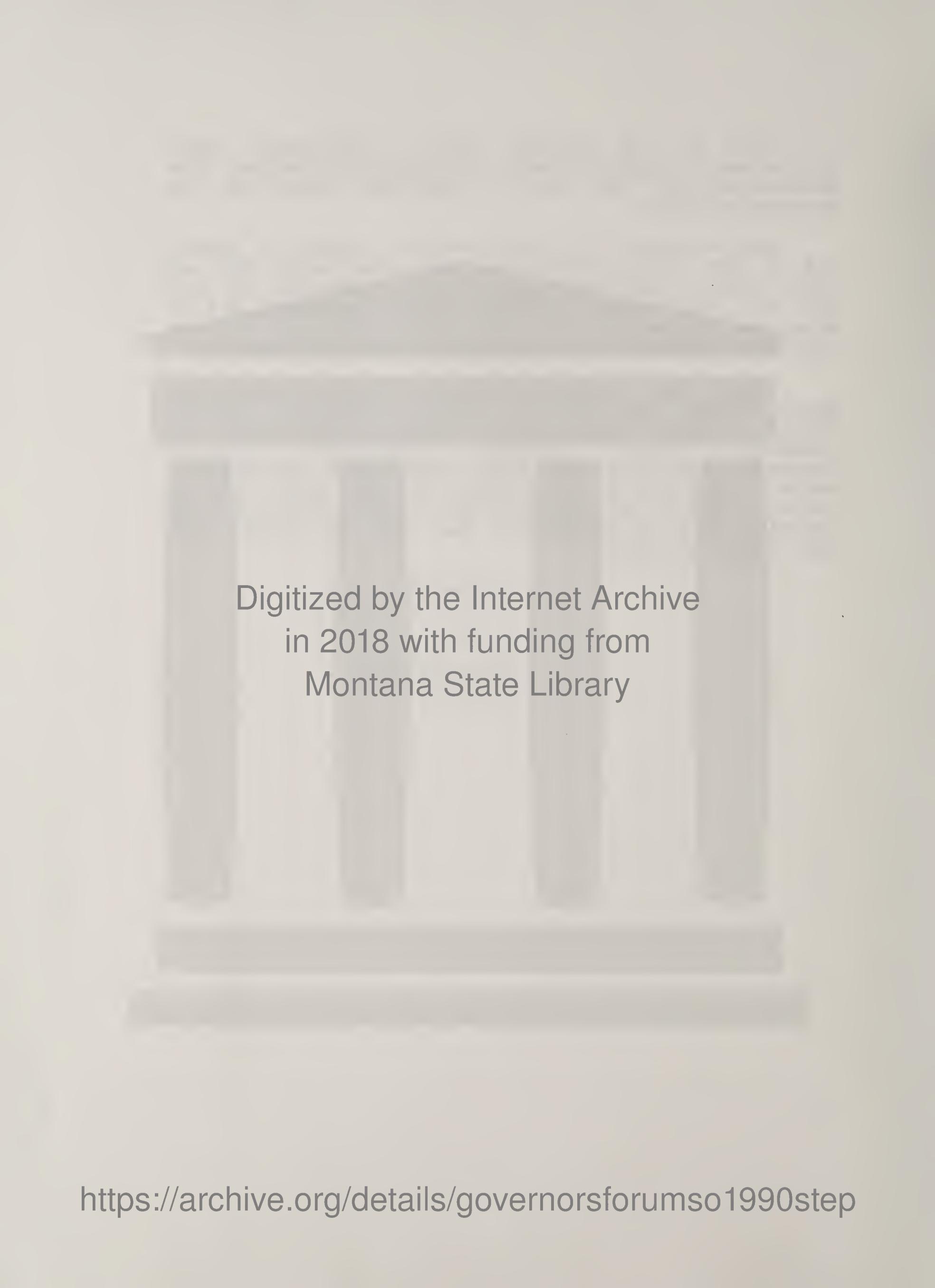
Let me thank all the volunteers, those in Helena and in the forum communities, who generously gave of their time to make the forums work as smoothly as they did. The facilitators and host school personnel did an excellent job as did the staff members from the various education agencies and organizations who assisted us.

Thanks also to Superintendent of Public Instruction Nancy Keenan, the Board of Public Education, Montana School Boards Association, Montana Federation of Teachers, Montana Education Association, Montana Taxpayers Association, Montana Impact Aid Association, School Administrators of Montana, US WEST Corp. and the Montana Chamber of Commerce for their financial and organizational contributions that made the forums and this report possible.

Sincerely,



STAN STEPHENS
Governor



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FORUM FORMAT

At each of the seven forums, participants gathered into small discussion groups to address a number of issues. They were asked to:

- develop a primary message about education they wished to convey to state policy makers;
- identify areas of strength and concern about their local schools;
- identify areas of strength and concern about Montana schools, in general;
- present their views on six education reform ideas contained in the Governor's New Century Plan: report cards for schools, alternative certification, parental choice of public schools, local control/elimination of unnecessary regulations, and incentive pay for teachers.

GROUP PROFILE AND LOCAL CONCERNs

The first task of each small group was to determine a group profile of participants.

Sixty-two percent of the participants statewide were either employees of a school district or school trustees; percentages ranged from a low of 54 percent in Lewistown to a high of 68 percent in Butte. Overall, 32 percent of the participants were from a Class "AA" school district, 43 percent from a Class "A" or "B" district, and 25 percent from a Class "C" district. Fifty-nine percent had children in public school, 5 percent had students in a nonpublic or home school, and 36 percent had no children in school. Eighty-one percent of the participants had been in a school during the last year.

When asked to put a letter grade on the performance of schools, participants graded their local schools in the following manner: A - 42%, B - 42%, C - 10%, D - .7%, F - .2%. Montana schools, in general, received: A - 11%, B - 60%, C - 19%, D - .9%, F - .2%.

When asked what they liked about their local schools, participants recognized dedicated personnel and community involvement as strong points; statewide, they appreciated Montana students' high test scores, low dropout rate and local control and involvement. Their greatest concern locally was for funding, equalization, a stable source of taxes, student/teacher ratio and

gifted, at risk, latchkey and drug/alcohol programs. Concerns for Montana schools as a whole centered on funding and taxation issues as well as consolidation.

THE PRIMARY MESSAGE

Each small group was asked to respond to the following question: "If this group could give just one major message to educational policy makers, what would it be?"

By far, the primary response to this question was that education funding was a major concern and more money was needed for schools. This response was followed by the strong expression of support for local control of schools. Other messages received were as diverse as the school districts and people attending the forums.

Governor's Response

The concern for education funding is reflected in the state's budget where 65% of our general fund and Foundation Program revenues are spent on education.

However, schools are not alone in this regard. The call for more funding is echoed by Montana's overcrowded and understaffed institutions, low-income recipients of welfare and health benefits, University System supporters, communities faced with environmental clean-up problems, the business community, and many other agencies and programs. This call is tempered by the message from Montana citizens that taxes are already at burdensome levels and should not be raised.

Our response to the primary message from the forums must be couched in terms of the budget realities facing Montana and will be limited by revenues available.

Montanans' loyalty to local control is well taken, and I strongly support it. We can do more to foster local control. I will ask the Board of Public Education and the Superintendent of Public Instruction to look at how the state can reduce duplicative and unnecessary reporting requirements for all schools. I will also suggest that the Board of Public Education consider multi-year accreditation for those schools which continue to excel year after year.

I would hope that Montanans recognize that, as good as Montana schools are, there is much room for improvement. Almost 20 percent of the students entering Montana's colleges and universities require remedial academic training. We need to better prepare our students for higher education and the challenges posed by a rapidly changing global economy.

GOVERNOR'S PROPOSALS

Following small group discussions of local and state concerns, each group was assigned one specific proposal from the Governor's New Century Plan. The proposals were intentionally stated in very general terms to allow as much creative discussion as possible about how the proposal could be written or changed to meet local and state needs.

REPORT CARDS

Overall, 22.4 percent of the participants discussing report cards rated the issue of medium to high importance to Montana schools.

Proponents noted that report cards could be useful for evaluation of local schools, comparison with national efforts, accountability to taxpayers and parents, and setting goals. Opponents argued that report cards might use letter grades to compare schools unfairly; that a published report might be used by parents to choose schools, could be susceptible to misinterpretation, and would encourage teaching to a test.

Governor's Response

Our report card proposal did not suggest assigning letter grades to schools but rather emphasized a report covering many different aspects of local schools for review and consideration by citizens. From discussions at the forums and subsequent information received, I believe a successful report card can be developed and would be acceptable, even to the education community, if there were cooperative input on its design and purpose, and the public was made aware of local characteristics unique to the reports.

I will ask the Board of Public Education to work with representative communities and education organizations to develop a "model" report card that would be made available to all schools. These reports would

not merely report test scores but also other, broader indicators such as student/teacher ratio, etc. I will ask the Board of Public Education to consider those indicators proposed in my New Century Plan as well as others that Montanans would find appropriate for their local report card.

LOCAL CONTROL/ELIMINATION OF REGULATIONS

Almost half of the forum participants rated this issue of medium to high importance to Montana schools.

Montanans cherish local control of their schools. They believe that eliminating unnecessary regulations could decrease costs, increase teacher time with students and enhance parental involvement in school decisions. Forum participants did express concerns that basic standards established by the Board of Public Education and the legislature be maintained.

Governor's Response

Between these two directives, there is room to ask whether we have developed a system of education in Montana which meets the Montana Constitution's mandate for local control.

To ensure that we have provided local school boards with as much control as possible while maintaining basic, state standards, I will ask the Board of Public Education to look at methods by which model schools can receive multiple year accreditation and possible variations in the alternative standard.

I will also request the Superintendent of Public Instruction to continue efforts to streamline the reporting forms currently required of local schools and report to the Board and me concerning requirements which will be curtailed or eliminated.

CHOICE

Only 14.8 percent of forum participants overall rated this area of medium to high importance to our state's schools.

Proponents advocated choice as an incentive for school accountability and improvement, increased parental ownership in and support of schools, and healthy competition. Opponents argued that choice could be a "back door" approach to school consolidation, could

create unhealthy competition, and create difficulties in program and curriculum planning.

Governor's Response

Choice is being used successfully in a number of districts in Montana. I will ask the Montana School Boards Association and the Montana Association of County Superintendents to work with the Superintendent of Public Instruction to produce a model for choice to be used by interested districts. In light of school funding equalization legislation passed by the 1989 Legislature, I also will ask the State Superintendent to report to the Board of Public Education on the feasibility of eliminating tuition where a parent wants to exercise choice.

INCENTIVE PAY FOR TEACHERS

Only 12 percent of forum participants rated this issue of medium to high importance, and 82 percent gave it the lowest possible rating.

While supporters of this proposal were interested in giving more money and recognition to good teachers, critics discussed friction and rivalry which could be created between teachers, the impossibility of rewarding all deserving teachers, and the difficulty in arriving at fair selection criteria and methods.

Governor's Response

Although there was interest in recognizing and rewarding good teachers, the incentive pay proposal received little support from forum participants. For that reason, I will not submit an incentive pay plan proposal to the 1991 Legislature. I will encourage private sector entities, professional organizations and local districts to emulate the recognition program of US WEST Corp and to establish their own, local incentives for teaching excellence.

ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION

Almost 25 percent of forum participants believed that alternative certification is of medium to high importance to Montana schools.

Supporters point out that alternative certification can be beneficial to small schools, especially in areas where full-time positions are not needed and could

increase the size of the teaching pool. They add that the proposal, which has been used successfully elsewhere in the country, could allow expanded curricular offerings in areas such as foreign languages, math, science, etc.

Critics of the proposal noted that the state needs clear and uniform certification requirements; that teachers need to understand the learning process, not just an academic field; and that there is no teacher shortage in Montana. They stated that there is a current alternative to regular certification through use of the Class V Provisional Certificate.

Governor's Response

If we are to maintain high academic standards, particularly in the areas of language and math requirements, Montana's small communities will need flexibility in obtaining necessary staffing. Heeding comments of forum participants, I will ask the education community to participate in further discussions of this proposal to include rule setting by the Board of Public Education, certification by the Office of Public Instruction, using current Class IV and Class V certificates to allow alternative routes to certification, close monitoring and supervision, inservice requirements, and use of teacher tests.

CONCLUSION

This administration has taken the lead in the restructuring of education in Montana and the nation. We initiated the education forums which provided the data for this report, and we have endorsed the national education goals put forth by the National Governors' Association. In our actions, we have demonstrated our belief that good, quality education is paramount to the future success of our state, its citizens, and our nation.

Even though the forums have ended, this is essentially just the beginning of a process. We must continue evaluating and studying Montana's education system for improvements. There is much more work ahead, and we look forward to joining with Montanans committed to educational excellence in this decade, and throughout Montana's second century.

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